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‘The whole week comes down to the team sheet’: a footballer’s view of insecure work

Abstract

This ‘on the front line’ article focuses on the work and employment situation for an insecure, individualized sports worker whose main job task is fundamentally and publically collaborative. The narrative offers a realistic and nuanced understanding of the material conditions of work for a journeyman footballer and defies sociological ideas associated with attachment with and identification to work, which are frequently and implicitly connected to this profession. So while physical and skillful dimensions are commonly foregrounded, the testimony of (now) retired professional footballer, [player], lays bare not only the uncertainties and instability of this job, but also specifically the constant tension between securing fixed-term employment and being selected for first team games: making the ‘team sheet’.

Keywords

Attachment and identity, precariousness, professional football, retirement.

Introduction

The central object of this 'on the front line' article is to offer a narrative that provides a layered, thick description of the experience of being a 'jobbing' professional footballer in the UK. The narrative focuses on how fears about job security are shaped by the precariousness of making the 'teamsheet'. As now former footballer, [player], makes clear, players are never sure whether they will be selected to play by club managers and so the discreditable status of 'substitute' is a persistent threat that augments the insecure nature of this work. Professional footballers engage in skilled manual labour, but it is also entertainment work that requires the retention of high skill levels and a concomitant creativity: work which has inbuilt limits beyond which it cannot be readily deskilled or rationalized. Football is a team sport, and work is organized around collective priorities, yet conditions of work for players engineer individualistic workplace attitudes and generate direct rivalries among teammates for 'work' exposure (Author, 2006). So this is contingent employment in the sense that players quickly comprehend the constant surplus of talented labour and their vulnerability to injury and ageing (Gearing, 1999). While players must fulfill all contractual duties, daily training but also (irregular) club public relations and commercial activities, [player] stresses that match day performances are for players understood as the only context to sustain their careers in a practical, material sense. In contrast to jobs that similarly include a temporary or on-call work status (e.g., doctors, supply teachers, theatre seconds), being named as substitute or de-selected altogether from a match day squad is, as [player] attests, heavily stigmatising and fosters a marginal workplace identity (Dunphy, 1987).

There are around 4,000 professional football players (in the UK) all of whom possess a market 'value' based on reputation. Playing reputations and talent, which are severely limited in supply and not easily reproduced, can be thought of as 'capital' that is reflected in the major salaries paid to top players, although reputations are volatile (Morrison, 1996). The uniqueness and rarity of individual skills combined

with performance acclaim may lead to shifts in demand: in contrast the 'value' of a player can drop catastrophically if they sustain a long-term injury (Szymanski, 2010). The labour market therefore is segmented to the extent that Premier League footballers typically earn each week £25,000, Championship players £4,000, League One players £1,700, and League Two players £1,300 (Goddard and Sloane, 2014). Football at all levels is materially rewarding, but average careers last eight years and contracts outside the Premier League are normally one year in length: there is a tendency for a reduced basic salary but high performance-based bonuses (Szymanski, 2010). The football industry in the UK does not implement salary caps and favours a free marketplace where players are exchanged via a transfer market. It is a labour intensive industry in which employment is offered to an increasingly mobile labour force. For example, it is now commonplace for up to 35% of the playing workforce (approximately 1500 players) to move clubs permanently or temporarily each season to find work (Author, 2013): market realities for players with few transferable employment skills militate against stable working relations.

WES has published sociological research that examines employees' relationships to their work and explored labour processes for people operating outside 'conventionally recognisable' work, for instance actors and musicians, and has done so to raise questions about workplace communitarian and instrumental relationships (Dean, 2005; Unmey and Kretos, 2014). Studies of creative labour, for example, stress the idea that this work is different from jobs characterized by a 'nine-to-five grind' because there is a stronger sense that workers can pursue intrinsically-motivated objectives (Thompson et al, 2016). Although labour market pressures to access the football industry may appear to ensure high self-motivation, felt acutely among players as an outcome of the surplus of potentially-skilled labour, [player] contests any presumption that roles carrying prestige and status necessarily promote individuals' long-term attachment to and identification with their work in part as an outcome of ineluctable demands brought about by unceasing workplace evaluation

(Smith and McKinely, 2009). In contrast to much of the sociological literature examining contingent forms of employment – in this instance work that is fixed-term, unstable and physically hazardous – the narrative foregrounds neither coping strategies employed by workers and organisations nor the (re)production of particular types of social selves who may better endure precarious work circumstances (Kalleberg, 2012). [Player]’s narrative illuminates how precarious working conditions contour interconnections between career trajectories, workplace identity and material survival in this sports work.

[Player] played for four clubs during his 17 year career in the Football Championship, League One and League Two. At 27 years, he commenced a part-time Sport Science degree at Liverpool John Moores University while contracted for Crewe Alexandra FC, and in time [player] read [author]’s published academic research on athletic careers and made contact to debate its content. As correspondence developed, two interviews were arranged, six months apart, to discuss [player]’s playing career trajectory, the job issues he faced and the meaning of work: life on the front line. Aged 33 years old, his last club, [club] Town FC in League Two, did not offer [player] a new job contract in May 2014, and so a third interview was subsequently undertaken six months after he made the decision to quit the pursuit of his football career. Of the four subsections that make up his narrative, the first two are constructed from the initial two interviews; the two final subsections come from the last interview in which [player] explains his exit from football. In 2014, [player] graduated with first class honours.

Working in football

I remember being about 18, being on a night out with my mate, and a friend of his coming over to chat. He was an older guy who I’d never met before. He said, ‘what do you do?’ and I said ‘I’ve just signed professionally at Crewe’. And he must have spent 15 minutes telling me what I needed to do to have a good career. I didn’t want

to appear rude so I let him keep talking. And then he went and I said to my mate 'who's that?' He said, 'oh, just some fella who lives around the corner'. I asked, 'is he a good player?' And he went, 'I don't think he's ever kicked a ball in his life'. Over the years that story has repeated itself. Literally everybody has got an opinion on this job even though they have no level of expertise. They think you should be doing something different, or you're great, or not so great, or you can't do this, but you can do that. Where else does that happen?

I take a great deal of pride in being a professional footballer and for me that means that I'm a professional every waking minute. I don't turn it on and off. I know some players don't have that attitude, they would see their work as mainly on a game day. I find that I'm more comfortable being a professional every day. I expect to play well. I'm quite assured, so when I do well that becomes the expectation. The flipside of that is when I don't do so well, I find it's difficult to accept. A few years back it got to a stage where the job became too important. I remember saying to myself, 'I'm not enjoying it, I'm just doing it'. Even though I had tried not to let it, it got me subconsciously, everything I did. What time are we eating? What am I going to eat? Where are we going? I can't go out on a Friday, I'm going to be tired tomorrow. Who are we playing Saturday? Who have they got up front? I wonder what he's like? It was like ivy that grows in everything I did, every decision that I made. It was always on my mind. I have tried to take a bit of control back over recent years. I think I will play better now over a longer period of time more consistently because I've got a better sense of separation between when I am at work, and when I am away from it. It's so critical and emotional and challenging, you know, every three days it's basically, 'you're great', 'you're terrible', 'you're not bad today', 'you need to do better', 'you're on top of the world'. When you win everything's fantastic, you're a great team, great players. You lose and the whole world caves in. And that has gone on every three days, 50 times a year for the past ten years.

Throughout my career there has been so much competition for places in squads and contracts. It's very much a case of 'I'm better than him', or 'he's after my spot', 'I've got to be better than him', and it affects your relationships with teammates. A lot of players will say or show this, 'I'm better than him', but I wonder how much is bravado. I'm much older and clearer now. I've been substituted a few times and jumped higher than anyone else when we've scored, which wouldn't have happened a few years ago because there would have been a tinge of, if they play well and I'm not in the team, I'm going to be out of the team again. I don't think it's realistic to think you are going to play every week. That's not to say it's not difficult. It's like a mini-bereavement when you've been left out. It's like your identity has been taken from you. Everything comes crashing down for hours. I used to chew on it for ages because you feel like you're on the brink and it's hard to perform under those constraints. It's an opinion-based game. I've played in regimes where the criticism has been very verbal, and you're left in no doubt what managers are thinking. At times it seems they have almost no faith in you.

It is terrible when you sit in the stand and watch other players playing in your position. If you went back ten years you'd see a different man. I can remember lying in bed praying that I didn't get injured. I don't even believe in God, but just in case I'd lay there and pray out loud, 'please don't let me get injured tomorrow, I'll do anything if you let me not get injured'. It was absolute turmoil. It was all interlinked though. I was the high achiever, I had great expectations, I didn't get injured in the youth team. When I signed as a pro I had a catalogue of injuries. I think I did my hernia and my cartilage and my left side in succession, probably more unlucky than poor conditioning looking back, but I lost about two seasons with recurring injury. There was one point I couldn't string six games together. It was absolutely heart-breaking.

Some of the lads love the interaction, the banter, whereas now I don't. I quite remove myself from it. I guess I find my football game face as I enter the building, I show them what they want to see so that I can be selected. I think I'm quite

compassionate, a caring soul but I end up hiding that because it's just not the culture. Caring for others just doesn't fit with how ruthless it is, especially as a player competing against other players to be picked. Altercations in training and games can be quite confrontational and there's always a chance of it spilling over. I used to get involved at Tranmere when I was younger. I was pushing myself to be as good as I could be and part of that was getting the best out of other people. I'd be falling out with teammates fairly regularly, knowing that there was a chance it would escalate, but being prepared for that. I'd say something and be ready to literally fight them. Nowadays, I don't want to be falling out with people, I don't think it's my job. It's the manager's role to keep standards. I say probably 10% of what I think now, just to ensure that I am selected. I don't want to upset the manager so I stay quiet just to keep the status quo.

How you find out about whether you are playing can be different at each club, but waiting to find out if you're selected is intense. The whole week comes down to the team sheet. For most games you have an idea about whether you will be selected. Last week's result has a bearing on selection, but we have a good idea what's going to happen. Your whole life revolves round being in or out. If you're in, you've got to stay in, which is a challenge in itself. If you're out then it's about dealing with the fall out of being dropped. You've got to get back in. It's relentless. I don't know if people understand how volatile this work is.

Finding work

I had a difficult summer in 2009 because I had been released by Crewe and I had to go on trial. I didn't sign with Northampton until the week before the start of the season, so in the six weeks pre-season I went on trial at Charlton, and then at Gillingham. Charlton said they'd sign me but then started messing about. Gillingham said come down for a week. I had to pay for my own hotel, but it was supposed to be one week, then a decision. After the week the manager said 'can you stay for

another week?' I can remember leaving in the car to drive 250 miles to Gillingham and crying because I knew I was being forced into it. I didn't want to move that far. You couldn't get much further away from home. I wasn't going to see my daughter for a week and she was only one. I remember waving and I just went down the road and had to pull over. We just couldn't make any decisions as a family, everything was so up in the air.

Eventually that summer I signed a two-year contract with Northampton. The family came with me but we only lasted six months there. I look back now and I wasn't playing well. The manager who signed me got sacked after a few games and I could tell the new manager coming in didn't fancy me straightaway. I got sent off in *his* first game in charge against Notts County. We got beat 5-2. I was sent off with 20 minutes to go, nothing horrendous, I was last man and I miss timed a tackle. I am hardly ever booked. I don't play like that. I was thinking 'God, this is a nightmare'. I knew I would get slaughtered and the manager said 'the centre halves have let me down today'. We didn't last long there. The manager wasn't playing me and I went to see him and he just said, 'you're not playing well'. But then Tranmere came in to take me on loan. So we moved back to the northwest but we'd let our house go to rent so we had to move into my mum's.

At Tranmere we were fighting relegation but within a few weeks of signing the manager asked if I would like to sign permanently for them in the summer. We managed to stay up at the end of the season but then the phone went quiet in regards to the new contract. I was chasing the manager all summer for an answer but it felt like he was dodging my calls, and in that time he was probably trying to sign someone else. That's just the facts of it. I was settled. I thought I'd played really well. And I had helped them stay up. It was a local club and I was enjoying it. Then all of a sudden I'm discarded. I ended up having to go back to Northampton. I had another year's contract to do so I had to go back to do preseason. I was living in my mate's spare room. I was going down twice a week on the train leaving at 6am, waving to

[my daughter]. I look back now and think 'how did I get through that?' We had no savings and a baby daughter. My wife wasn't working. We had zero stability and I was earning a lot less money than I was the year before. But there's no support, it's survival of the fittest. There's a lad who was released by Morecambe and went to [a southern club]. He left his girlfriend and his two year old son in Manchester. She's got a good job and he signed for two years. I said to him 'do you think that's the right thing? You're never going to see [your son]'. He signed for them anyway because he had no other options. There'll be no professional care at the club. They may have a caring GP or coach who understands, but I doubt it. They may have an informal, 'how are you?' 'Have you settled in okay?' But is he going to tell someone at the club that the move is really causing him concern? All the club concern themselves with is your on pitch performance, and it feels like all the rest is for you to deal with.

The situation with playing contracts has become really short term. It's one-year contracts mostly with limited match fees. Two-year contracts are rare. Often the management will say, 'we don't know what league we're going to be in', and 'we don't have the budget', and 'we'll have to wait 'till the summer', and then the summer comes round and all of a sudden you're in the mix with all the other 'out of contract' players. So for me to get offered two years last season at [club] is not the norm. I've got another season remaining, but I'm under no illusion, it's basically because I was doing well. There's no sentiment to it. I am aware that I am just a commodity. I think the recent recession has had a big impact on football. The size of squads, the salaries on offer, the length of contracts have all just come crashing down. I know a lot of experienced players who take the salary, a contract in the rat race, end up having to accept much worse terms. A good friend of mine played hundreds of games, and always earned decent money and was out of contract. He hadn't played that much the year before and was offered £400 a week, at 29, with a mortgage and bills to pay. Everyone's aware that at some point there's going to be somebody younger, of a similar ability, that's going to take less money than you can take.

Players are literally fighting for contracts. I'm on considerably less than I was five years ago. For example when I signed at Tranmere there were ten new players signed. I left the following summer and another eight players signed. Player turnover is huge. We played against Northampton last night, who I played for three seasons ago, and I knew three players that were there when I was there. Just three players out of 20!

I think you know it's coming though, I mean I'll know at the end of February if the writing's on the wall for me. That feeling of not being wanted is horrible. You feel a bit, worthless is too strong, but somewhere towards there. It's so opinionated: why does he not think I'm very good? You could be the most assured person in the world, but it can be soul destroying really if football is all you've got. Sometimes I wonder what keeps me motivated. There's no such thing as loyalty. It's just about me, doing the best I can do, and trying to be pleased with what I'm delivering, and then trying to go home and switching off. I do speak to my family about all this, but I've dealt with that much in my working life, you know that many challenges and injuries and contracts and being released and not being wanted, that I try to deal with it myself. I do feel that I should share the stress with those closest to me, but then, I am concerned that that then adversely affects them. My wife doesn't like the career I'm in at all, she thinks it's very restrictive.

The Injury (August 2013)

When I landed, all that went through my mind was the pain. At first they wanted to put me on a stretcher, but it was the first time that the girls [daughters] were going to come to watch me play. My mum and dad were bringing them to the game. I thought I'm not going on a stretcher, they cannot see me being carried off the pitch. So I just stood up and started walking and it was from one end of the pitch to the other and I was in absolute agony. I thought I was going to faint. I was ready to burst into tears. They took me off to the doctor's room at the back of the changing

room and I'm on gas and air. I had real horrific pain. I was just kind of all scrunched up, lying there. In the doctor's room there's two doctors and I've got a great relationship with our club doctor. And there was another guy there, and I just said 'shut the door' and I burst into tears and I wanted to say, 'I've just had enough of this shit'. I'd just come back from an ankle injury and I hadn't played much and I had all that to deal with and I was just in tremendous pain and I wanted to say, 'I'll just pack it in now, fix this and I'll just sail off into the sunset and do something else. I don't want to have to do this anymore'. I didn't say that, it was what was in my mind. If it had been just me and the doctor I would have said it, but there were other people there, and that went on for about five minutes and people were trying to get in the room and I just kept repeating, 'shut the door'. While they were sorting the ambulance out, I just tried to sort myself out.

My dad phoned my wife and then I was taken to hospital. I had an X-ray to see how bad it was and she came straight to the hospital. Even though I had just shattered my collarbone, I could see she was worried. I was in a lot of pain. I was lying in the hospital bed and I said to her, 'This is it. This is the beginning of the end'. I said, 'I'm not sure I want to do this anymore'. I knew I could come back from my shoulder, that wasn't really an issue, but I'd been on crutches all summer the year before with my ankle, and at that point I was thinking I want to get through the exit door.

The pain was hard to cope with for the first couple of weeks, but this injury cost me another guaranteed year in professional football. I got fit but I wasn't playing. I was a bit in and out. In my contract I had to play 75% of games, about 34 games, to get an extra year and I was thinking, this is going to be tight to make these games. But I knew it was coming. I knew I was going to get released by [club] by Christmas. The manager called me in. I mean, I was in and out of the team and it was the first time it had happened at [club] and it was getting frustrating. I have always tried to be a good professional and just got on with it. At our meeting he said 'your contract's

coming up, and I think it's going to be difficult to offer you what you're on already'. And straightaway I thought he's just aligning the blocks to usher me out the door. I think we had another meeting and he said, 'I still don't know. I'm not sure I'm going to be able to pay you what you're on'. He made a beeline for that phrase again. Then we got battered on a horrible Tuesday night against Accrington, 5-1 away. It was horrible, and then the next day he's brought this young lad in on loan to play centre half and obviously my situation was crystal clear.

The Exit (May 2014)

You can feel it coming towards the end. It's a strange feeling. But the club are the ones to get rid of you, and your teammates are just glad it isn't them. They're all happy for somebody else to take the heat. As a family we lost another summer due to the constant uncertainty. I was out of contract, and the anxiety of what would happen was bleeding into everything. I mean we went on holiday with the kids, and I just couldn't relax. I kept saying to myself I need to go and run, I've got to keep fit. I spent the days worrying 'who am I going to sign for'? I was desperate to hear something. It was constant and it had been going on for weeks. I was a soon-to-be 33 year old professional footballer without a club facing the possibility that my career was over. No interested Football League clubs had surfaced and pre-season was looming. When you're released it's like being thrown into the wilderness. Clubs all know so many players are available to employ that they can pick and choose who they see fit, so the transfer system becomes a cattle market. When the phone doesn't ring, or you get let down by agents or potential clubs, then major doubts start to creep in to your thoughts. Now not only have I been released, I've also not been picked up by another club. I'd always thought I'd somehow keep going, that something would come up, but the summer was anguish. Eventually I felt like I had a mini breakdown, I just couldn't stop the tears. I said to myself, 'that's it, I've had enough'. I knew that I had to make a decision.

You're acutely aware that you've always just done this, just played football, so what am I going to do now? What skills will I move forward with? I can remember my wife coming to me and saying, 'what's up? I thought you'd be made up. You have said you don't enjoy it for so long I thought it would be easier for you to let it go.' She envisaged this day of being free from all the constraints, and we can all move on. I just don't think my family really understood the amount of investment that I'd put in over the years, and I'd not felt like I had been rewarded and then, all of a sudden, it's over. It felt very raw. Over the summer I attempted to hide my anguish from those closest to me. The best word to describe this time is *lost*, just *lost*. But now it's over. Everything has been so regimented for so long. I've been told what to do and critiqued for 15 years, now all that is disappearing. You realise that your football exploits don't carry as much weight as you thought and you must start from the bottom again.

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